

Wittgenstein on Sameness, Necessity and Privacy*

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The aim of this paper is to examine Wittgenstein's arguments against the meaningfulness of statements which state the possessive privacy of sensations; and to demonstrate their incorrectness.

The English word 'same' is ambiguous and according to that the following proposition is ambiguous too:

(1) *The car of Peter is the same car as the car of Paul.*

The ambiguity of the word 'same' is caused by the fact that the word 'same' can be used in English in two different ways and meanings. Let us therefore distinguish 'same₁' and 'same₂'. What do 'same₁' and 'same₂' mean? To make the differences between 'same₁' and 'same₂' precise and obvious we can give the following definitions of 'φ is the same₁ F as α' and 'φ is the same₂ F as α':

[S1] *For all objects x and y: x is the same₁ F as y ↔ x ∈ {F} and y ∈ {F} and x = y.*

[S2] *For all objects x and y: x is the same₂ F as y ↔ x ∈ {G} and y ∈ {G} and {G} ⊂ {F}.*

Commonly the sameness of kind [S1] is called *token-identity* or *numerical identity* and the sameness of kind [S2] is called *type-identity* or *qualitative identity*.

In the paragraphs PU §244 – 254 of the *Philosophical Investigations*¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein focuses - in connection with the discussion of privacy (of a language and the consciousness) (PU §243 – 315) - on the following proposition:

(2) *(All) Sensations are (necessarily) private.*

This proposition is in more than two ways ambiguous, because of the ambiguity of the word 'private' (PI §246). Therefore Wittgenstein distinguishes two kinds of privacy: (a) *the epistemic privacy of sensations* and (b) *the possessive privacy of sensations*.

If we interpret 'private' for example in (2) as 'possessively private' then we can again distinguish to kinds of possessive privacy. And these two readings are especially connected with the ambiguity of (1) and 'same'. We can interpret:

(2*) *(All) Sensations are (necessarily) possessively private.*

as (2*.1) *A person x and a person y can't have the same₁ sensations.*

and (2*.2) *A person x and a person y can't have the same₂ sensations.*

It is obvious - as Wittgenstein states in PI §253 - that (2*.2) is a false proposition; but what about (2*.1)? If we interpret the expression 'can' in (2*.1) as *logical necessity* then (2*.1) seems to be a metaphysical truth: the consequence of a certain ontological interpretation of the world, which is normally called *substance-ontology*. We can reformulate (2*.1) as follows to clarify the claim that

the expression 'can' in (2*.1) is understood as logical necessity:

(2*.1.1) *It is necessary that for all x and y: if x ≠ y and x has a sensation and y has a sensation then the sensation of x ≠ the sensation of y.*

According to a specific reading of *substance-ontology* - which is for example supported by Frege² [II] - sensations have the following characteristics:

(O1) *Sensations are owned: they are part of the consciousness of a certain person.*

(O2) *Sensations need a bearer; this bearer (= a mental substance) is a certain person.*

(O3) *Every sensation has one and only one bearer (= a certain person that owns the sensations or is the bearer of them).*

(2*.1.1) can be derived from the axioms (O1) – (O3) of this specific reading of *substance - ontology* as a necessary truth. This fact that (2*.1.1) is a consequence of (O1) – (O3) can easily be shown. A proper formulation of (O3) is:

(3) *It is necessary that for all x and y: x has a sensation iff x has the sensation of x and no y has the sensation of x iff x ≠ y.*

The logical form of (3) is: $\forall x \forall y \Box((Sx \leftrightarrow (Hxs(x) \wedge \neg Hys(x))) \leftrightarrow \neg(x=y))$

Now we can derive (2*.1.1), which has the logical form ' $\forall x \forall y \Box(\neg(x=y \wedge Sx \wedge Sy) \rightarrow \neg(s(x)=s(y)))$ ', from (3) and the following reformulation of (O1):

(4) *It is necessary that for all x, y, u and v: if x ≠ y and x is a bearer of u and y is a bearer of v then u ≠ v.*

And now if we apply (4) to (3) we get:

(5) *It is necessary that for all x and y: if x has a sensation iff x has the sensation of x and no y that has the sensation of x iff x ≠ y then the sensation of x ≠ the sensation of y.*

The logical form of (5) is ' $\forall x \forall y \Box((Sx \leftrightarrow (Hxs(x) \wedge \neg Hys(x)) \leftrightarrow \neg(x=y)) \rightarrow \neg(s(x)=s(y)))$ ' and therefore we can derive from (3) and (5) the conclusion (2*.1.1). And that means that (2*.1.1) is a logical consequence of the above-sketched version of *substance-ontology* and therefore a necessary truth.

According to Wittgenstein the view that (2*.1.1) is a metaphysical truth is incorrect. He holds the thesis that

[CW] (2) - interpreted as (2*.1.1) - is nonsensical.

In my opinion Wittgenstein gives in his works two different arguments to justify this claim. I will focus in this paper on the first one of Wittgenstein's arguments to justify [CW]. And it is my aim to show that this argument has two major weaknesses.

In the *Philosophical Remarks*³ [III] and the *Blue Book*⁴ [IV] Wittgenstein puts forward the following

¹ WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*

² I wish to thank Volker Munz for lots of interesting and helpful discussions.

³ FREGE, Gottlob. *The Thought*

argument [A1] to justify [CW]: According to Wittgenstein (all) propositions that are necessary truths do not express a metaphysical or ontological necessity: for example that something is true in every possible world. Necessary truths are no metaphysical truths! In Wittgenstein's opinion a necessary truth expresses a convention (of our language) or an (implicit) rule of grammar⁵. Therefore we can define logical necessity according to Wittgenstein as follows:

[LN] 'p' is a necessarily true iff 'p' is or expresses a rule of grammar or a convention of a language⁶ [3]

On this background we can reformulate (2*.1.1) as follows:

(6) 'For all x, y: if $x \neq y$ and x has a sensation and y has a sensation then the sensation of $x \neq$ the sensation of y' is or expresses a rule of grammar.

On the first sight according to this analysis (2*.1.1) seems to be true as (6) is. How can it then be nonsensical? We have to revise our assumptions to understand Wittgenstein's claim. We have to reformulate (2*.1.1) as follows:

(7) For all x, y: if $x \neq y$ and x has a sensation and y has a sensation then the sensation of $x \neq$ the sensation of y.

What are nonsensical proposition according to Wittgenstein? Let us examine three possible answers to this question. We can (A) for example define 'φ is nonsensical' as 'φ is neither true nor false'.

[N1] 'p' is nonsensical iff 'p' is neither true nor false.

According to [LN] and (6) the proposition (7) is a rule of grammar and rules of grammar are neither true nor false. Therefore (7) is in the sense of [N1] nonsensical. The problem with (A) is that we do not use the predicate 'φ is nonsensical' interchangeable with 'φ is neither true nor false' in English and [N1] is not combinable with [LN]: *How can a proposition that is neither true nor false be necessarily true?* A more serious problem of [N1] is that Wittgenstein never explicitly holds [N1].

A further alternative (B) is: We can interpret 'φ is nonsensical' as a predicate of assertions of propositions (statements) and not of propositions itself:

[N2] the assertion of 'p' is nonsensical iff 'p' is a rule of grammar.

And this fact can be justified. Rules of grammar are no empirical proposition, but normative propositions which are in fact neither true nor false. If someone asserts a proposition, he asserts thereby the truth of the proposition. But it is nonsensical or incorrect to assert the truth of proposition that is a rule of grammar and therefore neither true nor false; that means if a proposition is a rule of grammar then the assertion of this proposition is nonsense. The problem with this definition is that it is too narrow, because we also call assertions of some propositions, which aren't rules of grammar, nonsensical or incorrect. And [N2] is as [N1] not compatible with [LN]: *How can a proposition that is neither true nor false be*

necessarily true? Is the assertion of a necessary true proposition nonsensical?

A third and last alternative (C) to justify [CW] is: We follow our intuitions that nonsensical propositions offend against something; for example against rules of syntax, grammar etc. So we define 'φ is nonsensical' as follows:

[N3] 'p' is nonsensical iff 'p' offends against a rule of grammar.

We said that (7) is or expresses a rule of grammar. Wittgenstein calls such propositions *grammatical propositions*. The negation of (7) is:

(8) *There is at least one x and y: ($x \neq y$ and x has a sensation and y has a sensation) and (the sensation of $x =$ the sensation of y).*

And (8) seems to offend against the rule of grammar expressed by (7) as every propositions that can be derived from (8) like:

(9) *a ≠ b and a has sensation and b has sensation and the sensation of a = the sensation of b.*

An ordinary language reading of (9) can be formulated as:

(11*) *A person a (that is different from a person b) has the same₁ sensation as a person b.*

Therefore (8) and (9) / (9*) are nonsensical propositions according to [N3]⁷. And if we combine [N3] with the famous Wittgensteinian principle:

[WP] *If 'p' is nonsensical then the negation of 'p' is nonsensical too,*

then according to [N3] and [WP] (7) is as well as (8) nonsensical.

But we are again confronted with two major problems with our Wittgensteinian analysis on the background of [N3]: *Is it possible to formulate a rule of grammar for a term t or a proposition p just by using t or p and without mentioning t or p?* Propositions like (2) or (7) seem to be propositions about pains and persons and not about language use. They seem to express no rule of grammar. We have already quoted a passage of *the Blue Book* where Wittgenstein says that by means of 'My pain is my pain and his pain is his pain' someone makes a *grammatical statement* about the use of such a phrase as 'the same₁ pain'; we say that we don't wish to apply the phrase, 'he has got my pain' or 'we both have the same pain'. Is this claim of Wittgenstein correct? The following proposition for example expresses a rule of grammar: (10) *It is not correct to apply the relation 'φ is the same₁ F as α' to sensations in English.* In (10) the term φ is the same₁ F as α', which should be ruled, is mentioned. A grammatical proposition that expresses a rule of grammar should be about words or propositions, about the possible uses of a specific term or proposition and it is only possible to say something about the use of a specific term or proposition by means of mentioning the term or proposition: The

⁷ comp. with: "If in such a case you say: 'We feel pain in the same place, in the same body, our descriptions tally, but still my pain can't be his', I suppose as a reason you will be inclined to say: 'because my pain is my pain and his pain is his pain'. And here you are making a grammatical statement about the use of such a phrase as 'the same pain'. You say that you don't wish to apply the phrase, 'he has got my pain' or 'we both have the same pain', and instead, perhaps, you will apply such a phrase as 'his pain is exactly like mine'. (It would be no argument to say that the two couldn't have the same pain because one might anaesthetize or kill one of them while the other still felt pain.) Of course, if we exclude the phrase 'I have his toothache' from our language, we thereby also exclude 'I have (or feel) my toothache'." (BB p.54 – 55)

³ WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, Chapter VI.

⁴ WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 52 – 56.

⁵ "...when one says 'You can't count through the whole series of cardinal numbers', one doesn't state a fact about human frailty but about a convention which we have made." (BB p.54)

⁶ "3 x 18 inches won't go into 3 feet". This is a grammatical rule and states a logical impossibility" (BB p.56)

proposition (11) 'My pain is my pain and his pain is his pain' is not about terms and their use and therefore it is not possible to express a rule of grammar by means of such propositions as (11). Therefore the claim of Wittgenstein is not correct that (2) is a grammatical proposition or that it expresses a rule of grammar in the specific reading of (2*.1.1), because in (2) and (2*.1.1) all terms are used and no term is mentioned and they are in fact propositions about pains and persons.

A second problem of Wittgenstein's analysis is the following: *Is it really true that it is no matter of fact that the relation 'ϕ is the same₁ F α' can't be applied to sensations and just a matter of the rules of grammar?* I don't think so. What would happen if it would be correct to apply the relation 'ϕ is the same₁α' to sensations in our language? It would probably cause us to think more intensive about the strange thing called 'identity'. And maybe then we would come to the same conclusion as Wittgenstein in the Tractatus (5.5303): *"To say that two things are identical is nonsense..."* But this is in fact no serious strategy. The fact that two persons cannot feel the same₁ pain is not a matter of convention, because we cannot imagine the case that they do. If it would be a convention it must be possible to change the convention, but this case seems to be impossible and beyond our rational capacity.

It seems to me that Wittgenstein has no plausible arguments against the claim that two persons cannot share the same₁ feelings, which is not only a dogma of substance-ontology, but also a common-sense truth.

References

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